Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1974)

Heft: 1693

Artikel: The adventures of the Swiss abroad- from the Crusaders to Cesar Ritz

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688094

The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 60 No. 1693 FRIDAY, 27th SEPTEMBER, 1974

The adventures of the Swiss abroad – From the Crusaders to Cesar Ritz

by Marcel Ney

Swiss emigration is as old as the Confederation itself. There were two main reasons for this: the poverty of the land and the resulting poverty of the people who lived off this land, and the geographical situation of the Confederation at the crossroads of the principal routes of those days. The young Swiss saw the passage of noblemen and prelates on their way from north to south; itinerant merchants richly loaded with luxury goods from Italy and the east crossing the Splügen pass, the Gothard of the St. Bernard. They heard their reports of fertile lands, ever-blue skies, prosperous cities where people paraded in velvet and silk and compared this to their own lives in the narrow mountain valleys. All this seemed like a fairy tale enticing many young peasants to follow the travellers to more promising regions.

Seeking a better life

One should visualise the hard life led by these people and know the kind of houses and food they had to contend with to understand the appeal of more comfortable climes. Very little is known, however, of this first Swiss emigration. Young Swiss followed foreign merchants as servants. If they were lucky, they started their own businesses as modest tradesmen or small merchants somewhere in the rich regions of Lombard or the lower Rhine Valley. There must have been quite a few of them because there was a street in Genoa called Via Croce Bianca, the white cross, after an inn which was patronised by the Swiss of the town in the middle ages. This inn was in fact to be one of the roughest spots in town! The Via della Croce Bianca still exists and is at the very heart of Genoa's "Soho".

A second, and equally unknown face of this emigration, pertains to the participation of Confederates in the Crusades. This led some of them to settle permanently in Greece and on the Aegean islands. Most were murdered after a few years by the Turks but some lived through to a natural death and even acquired vast estates, such as Richard Deprez from the Pays de Vaud, who settled on the island of Euboa, and Peter Englisberg, from Fribourg, who established himself on Rhodes.

A third aspect of Swiss emigration is much better known and lasted until the middle of the 19th century. It concerns the Swiss mercenaries who soon built themselves the reputation of being the best soldiers in Europe. They were much sought after by the different monarchs and were soon to be found in all the armies of the Continent, not only as common soldiers, but also as officers – sometimes of high rank. During the 17th and 18th centuries, we had on average as many as 70,000 to 80,000 Swiss permanently engaged in foreign armies abroad. In wartime – and there was nearly always a war going on somewhere – they occasionally fought on both sides and the Swiss bravely killed each other at the foot of the walls of Naples, in Holland, and in many other places.

Bringing good manners home

But this emigration not only had drawbacks, there were some advantages as well. These mercenaries were a good source of income to the various Cantons which concluded special treaties with the King of France, the Emperor of Austria and other rulers. One should add that the mercenaries, strangely, also brought back more refined manners, especially the officers.

Some of these Swiss serving in foreign armies climbed the ladder to the highest ranks and honour. Among the many Swiss who rose to eminence abroad in this way let us mention Hans Victor Besenval from . Soleure, who was lieutenant-general in the French Army, later Ambassador of Louis XIV in Sweden and Poland, and built the very fine Palais Besenval in his home town and the even finer Hotel Besenval in Paris which now houses the Swiss Embassy. There was also Francois Le Fort, a Genevese who became a general and later an admiral of Czar Peter I and emerged ironically for a Swiss – as the founder of the Russian Navy. There were Samuel Weiss from Berne and Francois Treytorrens from Treytorrens, who were generals in the Swedish Army, Hans Rudolf Wermueller, a general in the Venetian and Austrian Army, Jean de Sacconney, lieutenant-general with the Dutch, and afterwards brigadier-general in the English Army and many others. The last two examples show that these high-ranking officers often changed employers and were rather like present-day football stars who obtain transfers from one club to another to wage one "battle season" here, one "battle season" there, depending on the money on offer.

This last remark does not lessen the merits of the Swiss military leaders. Moving from one camp to another was in the spirit of the time, and within their "jobs" these officers gave evidence of exceptional reliability and were excellent ambassadors for their home country.

A drain of human resources

In the long run, however, the mercenary system had an unfavourable economic influence on our country. The best young men were drawn away from home and this is the main reason why our country remained underdeveloped for such a long time. Today, we are now reported to be the richest nation in the world, having overtaken the U.S. and Sweden, and have in all more than 750,000 foreign workers. It is therefore very hard to believe that up to 1880 we had been one of the poorer nations in Europe. Some areas of our country, such as the remote valleys of the Grisons and the Tessin were considered to be among the very poorest. And the economic crisis of the early thirties of this century hit our country more than most of the others.

The relative barrenness of our country and the attraction from abroad had been the main factors of early emigration, but from the end of the 18th century, hunger and sheer necessity was the deciding factor in spurring emigration. The invasion of the French revolutionary army and the presence of

The Swiss Observer

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Published Twice Monthly at
63/67 TABERNACLE STREET
LONDON E.C.2
Tel: 01-253 2321
Telegrams: Paperwyse London

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the French in Switzerland during the Napoleonic era put an end to whatever prosperity had been attained within our borders. The population having increased from a few hundred thousand to more than two million by 1870, our country was literally unable to support and nourish all its citizens. During the whole of the first half of the 19th century, there were real famines. The anecdote of Pestalozzi selling his silver shoe buckles to feed starving children is sheer truth. The boys and girls in the mountains who followed the first tourists – mainly British – begging for money, did not do so out of greed or fascination by the eccentric attire of the foreigners, as Mark Twain believed in his charming book *The Innocents Abroad,* but out of need.

The Ticinese writer Piero Biancone describes in his excellent book *Albero Genealogico* (The Family Tree) the poverty that led our Italian-speaking confederates to a mass emigration. He recalls that his mother lived as a child in a valley only a few miles beyond Locarno. Her family was so poor that her father, the three uncles and subsequently all of her four brothers, had to emigrate; the father as stone-cutter to Germany, the brothers as chimney sweeps to Italy, the uncles to Australia and California. The rest of the family, the mother and daughters, remained at home to live in the most miserable conditions impressively described in Biancone's book.

The early hardships

Many Swiss were forced away from their motherland by poverty and sought fortune in the new world. These emigrants usually had no other capital than their capacity for work, their modesty, their thrift and the never-ending faith of their wives. Many of them fell in the hands of crooks, even Swiss ones, on their arrival in the New World and lost all the belongings they had taken with them. Sometimes, dishonest agencies operated with fake working contracts or made people pay for passages on ships which didn't exist. We can hardly imagine today the deception and sorrow that followed when whole groups of emigrants stood waiting on the pier in Marseilles or Bordeaux without a boat to take them to the promised land, or arriving in Buenos Aires or New York without work, without friends and not speaking a word of Spanish or English. Here, the different Swiss Benevolent Societies abroad were of great help and gave proof of the solidarity of the established Swiss towards the newcomers.

The damage caused by all these dubious emigration agencies moved the Confederation into passing a special law in 1874 covering these activities. This law is still valid today.

There are many stories of tragedies befalling Swiss emigrants. A Swiss group arrived in 1856 in Belam, Brazil, and were left by their guides one night, after having rowed up a river for several days, without boats, food and money. All the members one by one, contracted a most terrible tropical disease and died. Another group with children was left stranded in Perth, Australia, in 1880. The women and children were housed in a derelict building while the men went to look for work. When they returned, they found their families dead from consuming poisoned water.

Despite the hardships of the beginning, thousands of pioneer emigrants prospered overseas and founded colonies and cities that exist to this day. There was a second but less important wave of emigration during the depression years of this century. This emigration proved quite unsuccessful in at least one case. A group of unemployed Swiss emigrated with Government assistance to Misiones, in Argentina. But the enterprise had been badly prepared. These emigrants had been mainly recruited among unemployed factory workers and were supposed to start work as peasants at the other end of the world. The Swiss promoters of this programme were idealists who gave a completely false picture of future life in Argentina. In a circular letter, it described the people of Misiones as having to work for only a quarter of the year in planting and harvesting their crop. The remaining time was supposed to be given to hunting or other favourite enjoyment, or "people would just lie on their back and smoke cigars".

A failed experience

Such a mentality doesn't lead one very far, not even in Argentina. Many of these emigrants and their descendants still live rather miserably over there. Tragically, this group left Switzerland in 1935 and most of its members could have found jobs in Switzerland had they waited another year. The Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad has attempted to repatriate a number of Swiss in Misiones, many of whom having tried hard in the beginning without obtaining results, finally gave up and literally took to lying on their backs and smoking cigars. This could be one of the worst cases of failed assimilation in the history of the Swiss abroad.

Besides the emigration that was brought about by want and need, there has always been an emigration of qualified people who would have made their way at home but who were attracted by the wider possibilities offered in the bigger countries of Europe and overseas.

From the 17th century onward, Swiss bankers were to be found in most countries, from Saint Petersburg to San Francisco. In England, there were members of the Erlach family and the Banque Calendrin & Cie. In France, a Swiss banker became Minister of Finance just before the 1789 Revolution. A Swiss bank, still active in Florence and the most important private bank of the country, was until 1945 the official bank of the Italian Royal Family.

Swiss emigrants stood out equally in industry where there is hardly a field where we cannot find an outstanding performance. Swiss businessmen ruled over the international silk trade in China and Japan, they introduced cotton in Egypt, they started the cultivation of sugar beet in Italy and Russia, they reafforested the hills of Tuscany, they were the biggest brewers of several countries and the best-known confectioners everywhere. They built railways across the world and were the leading hotel-keepers.

The "Cesar" of hotels

Of the eleven luxury hotels of pre-war Egypt, eleven had Swiss managers, and some of them were so efficient and eager to please their mainly British clientele that their menu nearly attained the level of an average English boarding house. And there was Cesar Ritz, whose name was such that when he left the Board of the Savoy in London, Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, said: "If Ritz leaves, I leave too", and immediately cancelled a dinner party for 50 at the Savoy. To thank his high protector, Ritz had the floor of the old Carlton Hotel in Pall Mall lowered by several feet to build in some steps leading up to the dining-room knowing very well that his Royal Highness adored looking at ladies' ankles when they elegantly gathered their skirts and trains to walk up the steps.

One must not forget the humanitarian work of many Swiss abroad. There were also outstanding scientists and doctors, although the one

with the most typical Swiss name, Doctor Schweizer, was Alsatian – like Mr. Nestlé. Among the most noble activities were those of the many private tutors, educators and governesses of Swiss origin who found employment among the aristocracy of the world. Czar Alexander I, probably the best Emperor Russia ever had, proudly declared: "All I am, I am through a Swiss." This Swiss was his tutor Cesar de la Harpe.

A will that should have been ignored

Innumerable anecdotes can be told of successful, or sometimes eccentric, Swiss abroad. One who combined both these characteristics was Henri Moser, from Schaffhausen, the son of the promoter of the Swiss watch industry in Russia. He received the title of Baron Moser Charlottenfels, made expensive trips to Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan; He collected stupendous art treasures, plenty of money and ended mysteriously as Ambassador of Hercegovina and Bosnia in Paris at the outbreak of the First World War. He spent the ensuing war years in a house built near Schaffhausen by a Russian architect looking like the casino of an international spa. When he drove in his carriage, a Turcoman in full livery preceded him and he himself wore all the ribbons of his decorations including the rosette of the Légion d'honneur. With all this, his wife, the daughter of a Swiss banker from Naples, complained to a friend that they had the feeling that, although respected, they were not really liked in Schaffhausen!

Some Swiss abroad left some remarkable wills. This was the case of Pierre Thellusson, a wealthy Swiss banker of the City who died in 1797. His will complicated the lives of a great many people. He left a portion of his estate, estimated at £100,000 to his wife and six children. The remainder, worth £700,000, he assigned to trustees to accumulate at compound interest during the lives of his sons and sons' sons. On the death of the last survivor, the estate was to be divided among the oldest male descendants.

This will caused a sensation. It was calculated that by the time of its division, the estate might have grown to £35,000,000. A law was passed to prevent the drafting of similar wills again. For sixty-three years of law suits and appeals until the death of the last of his grandsons, the members of the family contested the way the estate was being administered and litigated against each other. In 1859, the House of Lords delivered the final judgment and divided the estate, but years of litigation and mismanagement had left little of the original capital.

Now an anecdote about a lady! There was a Swiss lady who mingled with the high society of Buenos Aires at the beginning of the century. She thought it a must to be seen embroidering in her drawing room. But her fingers were too clumsy from the hard work on the cattle ranch which was at the source of her husband's millions, and she hired a French girl to undo her daily work at night and then bring it a little further. But her visitors were not fooled and said that she held the needle the wrong way and pulled the thread down as though she was still milking her cows!

Comment

PLANNING THE FUTURE

The energy crisis has been most efficient in making us aware of the limits to the natural resources of this planet and the fundamental precariousness of our supplies. Shortages in other commodities such as sugar, wheat and even toilet paper has brought home the fact that we, as a growing population, must share goods available in limited and sometimes diminishing quantities. Recent events have also shown that our supplies can be upset by relatively minor upheavals. Paper was in short supply this year because of a strike in Canada. Sugar was unavailable because of price fluctuations which have caused exporters to sell it elsewhere than in Britain. Wheat has shot up in price because of bad harvests, and the same will happen to feed grains with delayed consequences on the price of meat – because of disastrous conditions in the United States.

The world's growing concern for its